DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 214 043 CG 015 777

AUTHOR Wollert, Richard; And Others
TITLE Causal Attributions and Normal Mood Variations.
PUB DATE Apr 81
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Psychological Association (61st, Los Angeles, CA, April 9-12, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Affective Measures; Anxiety; *Attribution Theory; *Depression (Psychology); *Failure; Hostility; Influences; Locus of Control; *Performance; *Psychological Patterns; *Success
IDENTIFIERS *Moods

ABSTRACT

Much theoretical interest has been focused on the role that causal attributions play in the development of mood disorders. Two experiments were conducted to evaluate the impact of outcomes and performance attributions upon mood. In the first experiment subjects performed different tasks which naturally gave rise to internal or external attributions. All subjects performed on the same word association task in the second experiment, but pretask inductions were presented to produce different attributions. Upon completion of tasks, subjects' moods were assessed using a modification of the Depression Adjective Checklist and the hostility and anxiety scales of the Multiple Affect Adjective Checklist. Subjects also rated the internality of their attributions and indicated effort and task difficulty. Results indicated that successful outcomes consistently led to more positive mood states than unsuccessful outcomes. Although the attributions of subjects were differentiated as intended, no main effects for attributions on mood were apparent and attributions did not significantly interact with outcomes to affect mood. The findings suggest that attributions may not be causally related to the onset of depression and that further research is needed to examine their relationship to depression and the lifting of depression. (NRB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED214043

CAUSAL ATTRIBUTIONS AND NORMAL MOOD VARIATIONS

Richard Wollert
Linda Heinrich
Daniel Wood

Portland State University

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☒ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Richard Wollert

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CG 015777

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Psychological Association Los Angeles, CA, April 9-12, 1981.

Causal Attributions and Normal Mood Variations

Richard Wollert, Linda Heinrich and Daniel Wood

Portland State University

Presented at the annual meeting of the
Western Psychological Association, Los Angeles,
April 1981

Over the last ten years much theoretical interest has been focused on the role that causal attributions play in the development of mood disorders. Valins and Nisbett (1971), for example, proposed that dysphoria often results when individuals adopt the belief that unpleasant events have been "caused" by their own personality dispositions. They further proposed that mood disorders may be alleviated by changing attributions so that situational rather than dispositional factors are emphasized in causal explanations.

In an analysis of achievement behavior, Weiner (Weiner, Heckhausen, Meyer, & Cook, 1971) presented a similar, but more elaborate, attributional theory. Weiner argued that, when an individual experiences an event, he or she attributes the cause of this event to one of four factors: ability, effort, task difficulty, or luck. The first two factors are seen to reside within the person, and attributions tied to these factors are thus classified as internal. The last two factors are thought to reside outside the person, and the corresponding attributions are classified as external. According to Weiner, internal attributions for success or failure produce more positive or more negative affective states, respectively, than external attributions. An easily deduced coroliary of this position, which we shall refer to as the causal locus hypothesis, is that subjects who make internal attributions for failure (e.g., to lack

of skill) and external attributions for success (e.g., to luck) experience more negative post-outcome mood states than subjects who make external attributions for failure and internal attributions for success.

Perhaps the most elaborate attributional theory of mood disorder is Seligman's learned helplessness model of depression. As recently reformulated (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978), this theory holds that an individual becomes vulnerable to depression when he or she perceives that outcomes are not related to responding. Whether depression occurs, and the form in which it is manifested, depends on the specific attributions which are made regarding the factors underlying this "helplessness". These attributions may vary along several bipolar dimensions, including internality-externality, stability-instability, and specificity-globality. According to Abramson et al. (1978), the "particular attribution that depressed people choose for failure is probably irrationally distorted toward global, stable, and internal factors, and for success, possibly toward specific, unstable, and external factors" (p. 68). The learned helplessness theory thus asserts a position similar to Weiner's theory with respect to the impact of internal and external attributions upon affective states.

The foregoing review indicates that several theorists have proposed that attributions are related to the development of mood disorders, and that the greatest consensual support has been expressed for what we have termed a causal locus hypothesis. A variety of approaches have been taken to empirically test this hypothesis. The most popular approach has been to compare the attributional styles of mood disordered and nondistressed

subjects (Klein, Fencil-Morse, & Seligman, 1976; Kuiper, 1978; Rizley, 1978; Seligman, Abramson, Semmel, & von Baeyer, 1979). Although the findings of these studies seem consistent with the causal locus hypothesis, a major drawback is that they are of a correlational nature, and thus, do not permit an adequate analysis of causal factors.

Another research strategy has been to identify subjects with internal or external attributional styles, to present success and failure, and then to assess and compare the post-outcome mood states of subjects (Wener & Rehm, 1975; Rehm, 1978; Pittman & Pittman, 1979). These studies provide weak evidence, at best, for the causal locus hypothesis. They also do not overcome the weaknesses of correlational designs regarding causal analysis.

The third, and most direct, approach to examining the causal locus hypothesis is by experimentally manipulating outcomes and attributions and then assessing the effects that these manipulations have on mood. Since precise control may be exercised over the sequence of experimental events, this approach also lends itself more readily than the other approaches to a clearly interpretable causal analysis of outcomes, attributions, and mood. Unfortunately, the only mood study to date incorporating this methodology did not focus upon the mediation of success by attributions (Wortman, Panciera, Shusterman, & Hibscher, 1976). A complete test of the causal locus hypothesis through the application of the experimental approach has therefore not yet been conducted. This paper briefly reports two studies in which complete tests were carried out.

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 attempted to assess the impact of success or failure on

mood for tasks on which subjects naturally gave internal or external attributions for their performance. On the basis of previous findings that low success rates lead to more negative mood states than high success rates (Wener & Rehm, 1975), a main effect for outcomes upon mood was predicted. On the basis of the causal locus hypothesis, it was also predicted than an interaction would be found.

Method

Subjects in this experiment were randomly assigned to one of two outcome conditions, success or failure, and to one of two attribution conditions, internal or external. Each subject then performed on one of two tasks. The external attribution task, which we will refer to as the "X/O" task, has been frequently used to assess the expectancies of subjects under chance conditions (Rotter, Liverant, & Crowne, 1961; Miller & Seligman, 1973; Wollert, 1979). Subjects viewed slides that were imprinted with either an "X" or an "O". Before a slide was projected, subjects were asked to guess whether an "X" or an "O" would appear.

The internal attribution task, which we will refer to as the "light" task, involved an apparatus used previously to assess the expectancies of subjects under skill conditions (Sacco & Hokanson, 1978). In this task, subjects were informed that a varying number of colored lights would be briefly flashed on a panel. Subjects were then asked to count the number of lights that had been flashed. The levels of success and failure were controlled in both tasks, with subjects either consistently succeeding (80% success) or consistently failing (30% success).

Upon completion of the task, subjects' mood was assessed using a

modification of the Depression Adjective Checklist (Lubin, 1965) and the hostility and anxiety scales of the Multiple Affect Adjective Checklist (Zuckerman, 1960). These scales instructed subjects to describe how they felt about their performance, about the experimental setting, and about immediately repeating the task, respectively.

Subjects then rated the internality of their attributions on an 11-point scale which asked: "How important is skill or chance in producing success on this task"? They also indicated on separate 5-point scales the degree of effort they put forth and the perceived difficulty of the task.

Results

Attribution data were analyzed using two by two (outcome x task) analyses of variance to determine that subjects classified the tasks as intended, and to examine possible differences between groups for attributions of effort and difficulty. The most important finding here was that a main effect for tasks for the skill attributions indicated that subjects did indeed classify the tasks as intended: subjects performing the "light" task reported that skill was a more important factor affecting outcomes than subjects performing the "X/O" task, F (1, 56) = 8.47, $p < .01$.

The mood data were also analyzed using two by two (outcome x task) analyses of variance. As predicted, main effects for outcomes in the depression and hostility scales indicated that subjects who failed felt more depressed about their performance, F (1, 56) = 51.30, $p < .001$, and more hostile towards the experimenter, F (1, 56) = 14.28, $p < .001$, than subjects who succeeded. No main effects for outcomes were found for the

anxiety measures. No main effects for attribution were apparent on any other measure and, contrary to the causal locus hypothesis, no significant interactions were found. The means and standard deviations of the mood scales are presented in Table 1.

Experiment 2

Experiment 2 attempted to assess the impact of success or failure on mood for tasks on which subjects were induced to give internal or external attributions for their performance. As in Experiment 1, it was predicted that a main effect for outcomes upon mood would be evident and that an interaction consistent with the causal locus hypothesis would be found.

Method

Subjects in this experiment were randomly assigned to one of two outcome conditions, success or failure, and to one of three attribution induction conditions, internal, external, or neutral. All subjects in the second study performed a Word Association Task similar to that used in previous attribution research (Wener & Rehm, 1975; Kuiper, 1978). Subjects were asked to indicate for 40 stimulus words which of two additional words was the most common associate. Outcomes were controlled so that subjects either consistently succeeded (80% success) or consistently failed (20% success). Prior to performing the task, however, subjects were given different information about the Word Association Task as a means of inducing different attributions. Personal ability and luck were the salient features stressed in the instructions designed to produce internal and external attributions, respectively. In a neutral third condition, no references to personal control or luck were made. Subjects were simply asked to choose

the associate that others pick most often.

The same mood and attribution assessment instruments that were used in Experiment 1 were used in Experiment 2, although premeasures of potential attributions were also obtained.

Results

Attribution data were analyzed using two by three (outcome x induction) analyses of variance. On both the pre-task and the post-task measures, a significant main effect for the skill measure indicated that subjects in the internal induction condition reported that outcomes were more skill-dependent than subjects in the neutral condition, who reported that outcomes were more skill-dependent than subjects in the external induction condition, F (2, 120) = 20.14, $p < .001$, and F (1, 120) = 11.86, $p < .001$, respectively.

Mood data were also analyzed using two by three (outcome x induction) analyses of variance. The impact of outcomes, as predicted, powerfully affected mood: main effects for outcomes were found for the depression, F (1, 120) = 43.77, $p < .001$, hostility, F (1, 120) = 5.47, $p < .05$, and anxiety, F (1, 120) = 7.45, $p < .01$, scales. No main effects for inductions were found, however, and no interactions were evident. The findings of Experiment 2, therefore, did not support the causal locus hypothesis. The means and standard deviations of the mood scales for this experiment are included in Table 2.

Discussion

This paper has reported two experiments which were conducted to evaluate the impact of outcomes and performance attributions upon mood. The method of controlling attributions was varied between studies so that, in

the first experiment, subjects performed different tasks which naturally gave rise to internal or external attributions. All subjects performed on the same task in the second experiment, but pretask inductions were presented to produce different attributions. As predicted on the basis of previous findings (Wener & Rehm, 1975), successful outcomes consistently led to more positive mood states than unsuccessful outcomes. Although the attributions of subjects in both studies were differentiated as intended, no main effects for attributions on mood were apparent and attributions did not significantly interact with outcomes to affect mood. The results of these experiments, therefore, do not support the causal locus hypothesis.

The contributions of these experiments fall at several levels. Methodologically, they demonstrate different techniques for manipulating attributions. More importantly, they suggest an approach to assessing mood in experimental settings which may be superior to previous approaches. This approach emphasizes that mood assessment instruments be constructed so that experiential referents are specific and time referents are immediate, and that scores on each mood scale are based on many items rather than a single rating. The sensitivity of this approach is reflected in the consistency with which the present findings were realized.

At a theoretical level, the results of the present experiments serve to contrast the very strong effect upon mood of positive and negative outcomes with the lack of effect for internal and external attributions. Simply put, the events which people experience have a definite impact on mood, but this impact does not appear to be enhanced or mediated by internal or external performance attributions. Our findings, therefore, call into question

the usefulness of the causal locus hypothesis for understanding the etiology of normal mood variations.

At the same time that these findings raise questions concerning the relationship between attributions and normal mood variations, they also raise questions about the relationship between attributions and mood disorders that fall within the clinical range. On the basis of clinical experience it seems that some, though certainly not all, persons who are depressed do hold internal attributions for failure and external attributions for success. It also appears that considerable relief is often realized by these patients after their attributions are neutralized or reversed. If, as the present findings suggest, attributions are not causally related to the onset of depression, how is their relationship to depression and the lifting of depression to be understood?

To fully answer these questions it would be necessary to set forth several theoretical propositions regarding the etiology and components of depression. Unfortunately, this is beyond the scope of this paper. We suggest, however, that depression often occurs when a negatively distorted, highly evaluative, and consistently nonsupportive self-relational style is activated by a negative experience. Those who exhibit this style tend to be highly critical of themselves when their behavior is ineffective, and to not affirm themselves when their behavior is effective. Therefore, according to this view, the cognitive patterns of depressives which have been measured as attributions are most accurately thought of as specific manifestations of a more general evaluative and nonsupportive self-relational style. The attributions or evaluations that we clinically

observe in depressives, furthermore, probably do not act in isolation to produce depression; rather, they consolidate and perpetuate a depressive episode by acting in concert with other manifestations of this style. Finally, we suggest that attribution therapy, when effective, does not owe its effect to the manipulation of attributions alone. Instead, we suggest that attribution therapy is effective because it undercuts the evaluative and nonsupportive self-relational style that underpins depression.

References

Abramson, L. Y., Seligman, M. E. P., & Teasdale, J. D. Learned helplessness in humans: Critique and reformulation. Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 1978, 87, 49-74.

Klein, D. C., Fencil-Morse, E., & Seligman, M. E. P. Learned helplessness, depression, and the attribution of failure. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1976, 33, 508-516.

Kuiper, N. Depression and causal attributions for success and failure. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1978, 36, 236-246.

Lubin, B. Adjective checklists for measurement of depression. Archives of General Psychiatry, 1965, 12, 57-62.

Miller, W. R., & Seligman, M. E. P. Depression and the perception of reinforcement. Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 1973, 82, 62-73.

Pittman, N. L., & Pittman, T. S. Effects of amount of helplessness training and internal-external locus of control on mood and performance. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1979, 37, 39-47.

Rehm, L. P. Mood, pleasant events, and unpleasant events: Two pilot studies. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 1978, 46, 854-859.

Rizley, R. Depression and distortion in the attribution of causality. Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 1978, 87, 32-48.

Rotter, J. B., Liverant, S., & Crowne, D. P. The growth and extinction of expectancies in chance controlled and skill tasks. Journal of Psychology, 1961, 52, 161-177.

Sacco, W. P., & Hokanson, J. E. Expectations of success and anagram performance of depressives in a public and private setting. Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 1978, 87, 122-130.

Seligman, M. E. P., Abramson, L. Y., Semmel, A., & von Baeyer, C. Depressive attributional style. Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 1979, 88, 242-247.

Valins, S., & Nisbett, R. E. Attributional processes in the development and treatment of emotional disorders. New York: General Learning Press, 1971.

Weiner, B., Heckhausen, H., Meyer, W., & Cook, R. Causal ascriptions and achievement behavior: A conceptual analysis of effort and reanalysis of locus of control. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1972, 21, 239-248.

Wener, A. E., & Rehm, L. P. Depressive affect: A test of two behavioral hypotheses. Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 1975, 84, 221-227.

Wollert, R. W. Expectancy shifts and the expectancy confidence hypothesis. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1979, 37, 1888-1901.

Wortman, C. B., Panciera, L., Shusterman, L., & Hibscher, J. Attributions of causality and reactions to uncontrollable outcomes. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 1976, 12, 301-316.

Zuckerman, M. Development of affect adjective checklist for measurement of anxiety. Journal of Consulting Psychology, 1960, 24, 457-462.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations[a] for
Mood Scales in Experiment 1

	Conditions			
	Success		Failure	
	Internal Attributions	External Attributions	Internal Attributions	External Attributions
Mood				
depression	4.93 (1.44)	6.47 (2.20)	10.47 (2.61)	10.93 (3.94)
hostility	3.53 (2.17)	4.00 (1.69)	5.60 (3.00)	6.53 (2.39)
anxiety	6.60 (2.03)	6.93 (3.20)	7.67 (2.06)	7.40 (2.64)

Note. Fifteen subjects participated in each condition.

[a]Standard deviations are in parentheses.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations[a] for Mood Scales in Experiment 2

	Conditions					
	Success			Failure		
Mood	Internal Induction (n = 20)	External Induction (n = 21)	Neutral Induction (n = 21)	Internal Induction (n = 21)	External Induction (n = 21)	Neutral Induction (n = 22)
depression	6.70 (1.79)	6.57 (1.66)	7.19 (2.23)	10.81 (3.54)	9.62 (2.95)	10.77 (4.05)
hostility	7.65 (3.01)	5.24 (2.83)	6.24 (3.21)	7.67 (3.32)	7.86 (2.85)	7.46 (3.29)
anxiety	6.60 (1.93)	6.10 (2.61)	7.10 (2.98)	8.19 (2.64)	7.76 (2.74)	8.23 (3.22)

Note. [a]Standard deviations are in parentheses.